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ABSTRACT

This paper examines parents' experiences of knowing and being known by others in the rural schools attended by their children. Within a larger phenomenological research project on parents' experiences of standing up for their children at school, the condition of knowing and being known stood out clearly as a function of parental involvement in rural schools. Several interviews were conducted with each of eight parents from five rural families who had been involved in conflict with the school and who were well known and active in their communities. The conflicts between parents and administrators or teachers involved the attempted retention in grade of a dyslexic child with a high IQ, immediate dismissal from the track team of a boy charged with a misdemeanor before any legal processes took place, parents' perception that Black children were receiving less teaching time and attention than White classmates, humiliating remarks about a child made by a coach during gym class, and the suspension of two girls for fighting. Through use of interview summaries and direct quotations, an understanding of the reciprocal knowledge of parents and staff in rural schools is developed in three themes: (1) we know the teachers and principal; (2) whenever a child has a problem at school, it becomes common knowledge in the community; and (3) what happens at school can change relationships between parents and school staff and between parents and their friends in the community, and can interfere with parents' professional association. An appendix describes the research methodology. (SW)

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Knowing and Being Known:
Parents' Experiences with Rural Schools

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Knowing and Being Known: Parents' Experiences with Rural Schools

Members of rural communities[1] are better acquainted with each other (Lefcourt & Martin, 1983) than their urban counterparts are. Teachers and principals know the parents (McCracken & Miller, 1988), and the parents know their children's teachers and principals; the knowledge is revealed casually and absently. In urban and suburban settings, such matter-of-fact talk about teachers and principals may be interpreted as name dropping or obsessive familiarity, given that the school houses mostly strangers and only a few familiar faces.

When I was growing up in the 1950s, my sisters and I attended rural schools, and my mother was a teacher. Thus, I knew the names not only of the six teachers in my grade school but also the names of the high school teachers, the principal, coaches, councilor, band director, school superintendent, and so on. My mother taught with a principal who had been her student and my eighth-grade teacher.

I attended one of the last one-room school houses in Missouri, complete with a well and outdoor toilets. I'm no stranger to small schools, to attending the same church as the superintendent, or to belonging to a 4-H Club with most of my schoolmates. However, before I interviewed rural parents for this study, I had not considered how knowing and being known by others shaped parents' experiences with schools, especially when they found themselves in conflict with teachers or principals.

This paper examines the question: What is it like for parents to know and be known by others in rural schools? Parents' experiences with knowing and being known are embedded in a larger phenomenological research project on parents' experiences standing up for their children at school. (See the appendix for a description of the research methodology.) Urban, suburban and rural parents were interviewed about their experiences. Although the intent of

the research was not to compare the parents' relationships with schools in different contexts, the condition of knowing and being known as a function of parental involvement in rural schools stood out so clearly in the interviews that I could not ignore it. An understanding of this reciprocal knowledge in rural schools is developed here in three themes: (a) we know the teachers and principal; (b) it is common knowledge whenever a child has a problem at school; and (c) what happens at school can change relationships.

These themes emerged during interviews with parents who experienced varying degrees of conflict with schools. Examples of the kinds of episodes causing parents to stand up for their children at school follow. A son who had dyslexia paired with a high I.Q. was to be retained in the sixth grade. Because of a misdemeanor charge, a son was kicked off the track team before the legal processes had taken their course. A son and other black children in a third-grade classroom were receiving less teaching time and attention than their white classmates. A coach called a small seventh grade son "Baby Stevie" in gym class.

There came a point in these episodes at which the parents felt they had to stand up for the children. Their interventions on the children's behalf provide the background for the parents' experiences of knowing and being known at school. First, we look at parents' knowing the teachers and principal.

We Know the Teachers and Principal

The eight parents whose experiences are related here are from five families who were well known in their communities. Their occupations include social worker, farmer, small-business owner, vocational school dean, and county librarian. They are active in churches, civic organizations, youth activities, a civil rights organization, and on park, agricultural, and school boards. In each family, at least one parent has lived in the community or a neighboring community all her or his life, except for stints at college

and, perhaps, the first job after college. One parent said, "We were well known in the community. Not that we're anything extra special, but we were known."

These parents casually made references to being known by the principals and teachers. One parent said the principal with whom she and her husband had been in conflict had known her husband, Clearance, since he was a child. The principal had been Clearance's teacher in third grade and was a member of the same investment club, as well as his children's principal. While the respective families had not been intimate, Clearance had been known to the principal for a very long time. Another parent said that, the principal "has known me from the past, that I'm very straightforward. So he felt like if I had to come to him, it was for a legitimate reason." She and the principal had common experiences. He knew her and her children.

These parents also knew the teachers and principals. One parent, speaking about the teachers whom he'd stood up to for his children said, "I think in every case I've known that teacher. I know them from some kind of contact. In some way I know that person."

What does it mean to know teachers or principals? For these parents, it meant chatting as one jogged with a principal; for another it meant attending the Sunday School class taught by the principal. It meant calling the principal at home to ask if one's daughter had been assigned to the wrong math class after a teacher insisted she had not been. It meant joking with a teacher in a store about what one's son had done in school that day. It meant going way back with teachers and principals; in some cases their roots were intertwined in the community over generations. It meant when they talked school talk, that the teachers and principals were familiar with all their children and had a history with them.

It also meant that parents had observed teachers and principals over the years and were familiar with how they did

things. For example from involvement with his sons and their friends, Ray[2] knew that the principal severely punished some students at the high school. He said,

> There was a lot of good kids that got, I thought, hammered on really hard. And one thing that kind of seemed a double standard to me, most of the bad kids were not involved in anything, extracurricular activities or anything like that. Most of the good kids were, so the first thing that went when they got in trouble was the letter in track or something....And a lot of these kids had maybe gone out for football and played their tails off from July to October, and all of a sudden they'd do something, and he yanks them off the team and suspends them enough days that they lose their letter. So, I'm not saying that sports is more important than school, but he uses it as a real punishing tool for the good kids involved in extra-curricular activities....He has a distinct personality.

Ray knew the principal's style and critiqued it, recognizing both faults and strengths. He had had experience with the principal at both school and church, had stories to tell about him, and had a sense of the kind of person he was.

We see a layering of relationships among these parents and school professionals. In addition to the parent-teacher/principal relationship, some parents talked about principals and teachers as friends. As one put it, "There's probably not been a teacher that the boys have had--not that they're close friends, but I would consider them friends in a general sort of way." Some had professional relationships, such as the social worker who had contact with teachers and principals regarding child welfare. Some were neighbors, customers, members of the same civic organization and church. One parent was on the school board--an employer relationship albeit indirect. The connections between parents and teachers and principals were multiple, varied, and overlapping. Because rural society is generally integrated

(Nachtigal, 1982b), the relationships between parents and teachers and principals are complex. When a mother goes to school to see the teacher about a problem her son is experiencing, will the teacher "orient" to (Schutz, 1964) her as mother, social worker, or member of the school board?

Not all rural parents have the multiple, thickly layered relationships with teachers and principals that these parents have. Jim and Patty Brown were less educated, had jobs with lower social status, and appeared less affluent than the parents included in this study. Their social circle did not overlap with the higher status school professionals. They did not speak about relationships with teachers and principals beyond the school, but they were friends with the teacher's aid for the learning disabilities classroom.

Knowing the teachers and principals and being known by them is taken for granted by the participants. Knowing each other is transparent in the sense that parents pay no attention to it. It's a part of everyday life in rural schools.

Whenever a Child has a Problem at School It becomes Common Knowledge

If parents are known in the community, it follows that their children's school problems also will be known. Here's how one parent explained it:

> I think small town communities--we're no different from any other. If you are not successful and well accepted in school, then you have that same problem in all the other activities because it's so well known what your school stature and status is. And it carries out into other things within the community....The school is such a major part of all the social functions.

In Mrs. Johnson's town, as in so many other rural communities, the school is the center of the community (DeYoung, 1995). If a child has a problem in the school, it seeps out into the community and affects the child and the family in their relations with the community. Three episodes

are illustrative: The Johnson's son Pat was diagnosed as dyslexic during first grade. Mr. Miller's son passed a calculator to a friend in algebra class. Two girls were expelled from school for fighting.

Mrs. Johnson said about Pat's dyslexia: "We never hid it. There's not a soul in town that doesn't know that we struggled and we struggled hard." Mrs. Johnson explained how Pat's difficulties at school affected him in the community:

> It was just like everybody in town when Pat was young knew Pat was having trouble. That wasn't good, you know things weren't good for Pat, and it's just like, "Well you know, maybe there's something wrong with him," or whatever. "We don't really want to be associated, and we don't really maybe want him to be in our group. So we'll just sort of make it a little harder and maybe he'll drop out or go away," or whatever.

Things going poorly at school made participation in social groups outside of school more difficult to achieve. Other boys actually didn't want him in their scout troop or on their ball team, and he became a bit of an outcast. Pat's school problem caused not only teachers but, also, other adults in the community to assume he was less able than other children. Mr. Johnson related how scout leaders underestimated Pat:

> They didn't think he could do the mile swim. The mile swim is a big thing with scouts. Swim a mile when you're twelve, thirteen. It took Pat two years. There was no question in Pat's mind or my mind. He's going to swim a mile. Not only did he do that, he's also a lifeguard. But we did all those things. But there were parents who thought, "Don't let Pat try. He can't do that." He did all that!

Pat's disability followed him like a shadow everywhere he went in the community. Since the same families go to school, attend extracurricular activities, church, baseball games, and scouts, everyone knew that Pat had a problem, and

the problem influenced their understanding of who Pat was. Not being able to read well in school lead to his being marginalized as a boy scout.

Mr. Miller's son, Kevin, handed a boy's calculator down the row in ninth grade algebra class to someone who hid it. It was not found, and the students involved were called into the principal's office, questioned by the police, and some were suspended for theft. Kevin was one of the students who was suspended and referred to the juvenile court. His father said,

> And for passing a calculator he got 40 hours of community service. Along with all the trappings that goes with it in a small community....In a small school, everybody knows who the bad people were. And so consequently, as far as the rest of the community was concerned, those are bad people.

From this episode, Mr. Miller said that Kevin was followed by a "devil halo" throughout high school. Devil can mean an extremely wicked person. A halo is a differentiated zone around a central object (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1993). Kevin was the bad central object surrounded by a differentiated, negative zone. The "devil halo" wasn't seen just by the principal, it was seen by parents in the community as well.

Mr. Miller described how the "devil halo" followed Kevin:

> It wasn't only a case or two, a teacher thing, but it even extended to the parents who would chaperone a basketball trip. You know, there was an incident when all the team had gone to the city....And of course they're staying in some hotel and there's a report that someone was seen walking outside their motel window on the window ledge, two or three floors up in the air. And immediately someone accused Kevin of this. "It must have been Kevin." He wasn't guilty at all, but they immediately thought he was, so he got a grilling for

> absolutely no reason what-so-ever. So it extends beyond teachers and can include everybody else who somehow got rolled into it.

Who created the halo? Kevin? The principal? The chaperones? Town people who heard about Kevin's escapades over time? All of them living out their daily lives in a small, social system where people know each other?

Mrs. Robinson said, "Sometimes, if you're not careful, things (happenings at school) will get written up in the newspaper." She has been careful to maintain the privacy of her own children, since she knows what can happen in the community. There is one newspaper in her county and, she said:

> It's very powerful because everybody subscribes to it in the county....Because that's how I know exactly what's going on in the school system. Because they print the school news.

Mrs. Robinson was the chair of the education committee of the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) in her county and had special responsibility for observing and advocating for the schooling of black children. Two black girls had gotten into a fight and were expelled from school. She described the episode:

> And the black community became divided....One side of the river was mad with the other side of the river. And they really were not even concerned with what took place, how it took place, and what we need to do to get these kids back in school. I mean, it was just unreal. And the sad part about it--it wasn't that these two girls were bad girls. One was an A student, and the other one came from New York [and was] classified as a troublemaker....Well, these two girls were put out of school. Everybody was mad with everybody. There was articles, I think there was articles in the paper....And the [education] committee [of the NAACP] had to get involved to the point wherein that we need to get these

girls back in school because time is passing by, and what are we going to do?

The Black community knew about the fight and chose up sides. Not Black community against white administration of the school, but against each other. It was common for school issues of all kinds to be discussed at the black churches in this community, and that included the fight between the girls. The white community also knew about the girls, especially if they had been written up in the county newspaper. The fight at school became a community issue--everybody knew about it.

Thorton Wilder (1957) presented this theme of everyone in town knowing about another's troubles in "Our Town." Simon Stimson, the organist and choir director of the Congregationalist Church in Grover's Corner is discussed after choir practice one evening by three neighbor women walking home together. One comments that Mr. Stimson's drinking is getting worse--he was tipsy that evening. Another emphatically denies it; she has lived in Grover's Corner longer, and indeed, it is not worse! In fact, his drinking is not nearly so bad as it had been earlier. Later, Mr. Stimson hangs himself in his attic, and the undertaker says, "They tried to hush it up, but of course it got around," (p. 84). Despite attempts to deny and hush up Stimson's drinking troubles and suicide, they are whispered about around town; there's no keeping a secret about troubles. Everyone eventually finds out about it.

The same thing happens, when children are having troubles at school: everyone knows about it. The school not only educates children, it is often the hub of the community (Nachtigal, 1982a), sending out messages about children like pulsing sonar signals. Where home, school, and the community are closely tied, a child's self-concept can be strongly influenced by the school (Dunne, 1977). The school is powerful in shaping the community's image of a child, and the image can become very persistent.

What Happens at School Can Change Relationships

Standing up for their children at school changed some relationships for the parents. Sometimes it was with teachers and principals, and sometimes with others in the community. Here is what the parents said:

> You know, we walk in the door [to the school] and some people give us the cold shoulder and others don't.
>
> Oh, we're stigmatized some. By a few people.
>
> After that, I assumed a very cool posture toward [the principal]. I would speak to him, and as a matter of fact I made a point to just say, "Hello, Will," and nothing else.

Relationships with Teachers and Principals Can Change

There is an irony in parents knowing the teachers and principal. It is only if parents have a relationship with them that the relationship can take an unhappy turn. While some rural parents expressed little change in their day-to-day associations with teachers and principals, Mrs. Johnson, Mr. Miller, and Mr. Beckwith's experiences exemplify how the relationships can change. In each case, one must understand the nature of the conflict with the school to appreciate the changes.

Mrs. Johnson's son was diagnosed in first grade by a specialist at the state university as being dyslexic and, at the same time, to have an above average I. Q. The grade-school principal and teachers did not recognize the testing done by the university, nor did they recognize dyslexia as a learning disability; hence, the teachers did not use any of the teaching strategies recommended by the specialist. The Johnsons "battled" the school from second to seventh grade when they themselves discovered that special lenses would correct Pat's vision. Because of the boy's slow progress, it

had been routine for the school to put his name on the summer school list even though the principal knew the Johnsons arranged for a private tutor who would use the methods recommended by the university specialist. The school's persistence in putting his name on the list each year became a source of tension, and in sixth grade the inevitable happened. The sixth-grade teacher had been especially trying for Pat and his parents during the year and recommended that Pat be retained in the grade another year. Mrs. Johnson told of her meeting with the principal. She said,

> I do not care what you say and what you do, but that child will not be in that woman's room again!" And by the time I got done, I was almost standing on his desk. And I think that was the most radical and the most vocal that I had ever got.

The battle with the school was prolonged, absorbed enormous amounts of time, emotional energy, and even money as the family maneuvered to keep their son learning without his sense of self being eroded. They would not allow the school to hold him back a year.

Over time, the Johnson's relationship with the principal changed. Mrs. Johnson said,

> I had known...[the principal] a good portion of my life. He had been a teacher. His wife had been a teacher. I had them through the school system, so I knew them and had positive experiences with them with my older son. At least not negative ones. And then as the situation went downhill, of course, the principal was in the position of trying to deal with us and support his staff and support the school--protect the school, I'm sure, from what he thought might be lawsuits and all of those repercussions and things....And we see them frequently in the community. The principal and his wife. And you know, it's a very strained relationship. You can tell some of the animosity is gone, because I think time--they've had their problems, some family problems, as

> time has gone on, and perhaps become a little more sensitive. But still, we see them, and we can be cordial to each other, but not ever friends. We can't ever socialize. It's too--you know--it's still too close to the surface. And you just wouldn't ever get over that.

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson told about good teachers and how some of them had worked so hard with Pat. Their associations with them didn't seem to change. But not so with the sixth grade teacher who had been so damaging and difficult. Mrs. Johnson said, "That one's just open warfare. It's very silent, but obviously she knows how we feel, and we know how she feels."

Mr. Miller had had a cordial but not a close relationship with the high-school principal. They occasionally jogged together and always chit-chatted when they met at community gatherings. But after his son was turned over to the juvenile court system for passing the calculator down the row in algebra class, Mr. Miller assumed a cool posture toward the principal. He said, "I would speak to him, and as a matter of fact I made a point to just say, 'Hello, Will,' and nothing else." Mr. Miller had a foreboding feeling about how his youngest son would get through high school with the principal who had either threatened or simply stated as a fact that if any other things like the calculator episode happened again, he would deal much more harshly with the son the next time.

The last time came during the last month of the son's senior year when he was charged with a civil misdemeanor having nothing to do with the school. The principal removed the son from the track team immediately upon his return to school. Mr. Miller objected in a sharp phone conversation, because although a charge had been made, the legal processes had not yet taken their course. A year after the son graduated and went off to college, Mr. Miller said this about his stance toward the principal:

> To this point, I don't know, if I see him out somewhere I would probably talk to him, because the anger is gone from me. I still think he's a world class ass hole, and I still think he has a lot to learn about dealing with people. But I'm not going to, I don't let that cause me to run around with bad feelings every time I see him. I've buried the hatchet on that.

Mr. Miller went from chit-chat cordiality with the principal to a cool posture to adverseness to burying the hatchet and not having bad feelings toward him. Because the relationship was more distant originally, changes in it seem not to have been particularly significant for Mr. Miller. (More about this episode is given below.)

Mr. and Mrs. Beckwith's oldest child entered first grade with high scores on the school-readiness test: she fell to the 21st percentile of the state achievement test by the end of first grade, however. Their concern that she wasn't reading, spelling, or doing arithmetic was reinforced by the end of the year test. They approached the principal whom Mr. Beckwith had known all his life and asked what could be done about the teacher since their daughter would also be in that teacher's room for second grade. They continued to work with the principal. Finally, when nothing was being done to improve the situation and they knew that their next child would be entering first grade in another year and have the same teacher, they decided to express their concern at a school board meeting. They brought to the board's attention the poor performance of most of the children in that classroom as was manifested by six out of eight first graders qualifying for remedial reading the following year.

Mr. Beckwith explained that they tried to get changes made in the school with the least fuss possible:

> The thing is, we thought we were going the easiest way we could for everybody involved. For the teacher--we didn't want to get people all upset, and have her feelings hurt. We thought we were going about it in the

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> best way--if we had done another way we probably would have just gone around and talked to each board member separately. But, that seems to me a little behind [their backs]--we want to be up front, but still not cause a big row.

Mr. Beckwith told the principal and the school board president that he and his wife would attend the next board meeting. Just a couple of hours before the meeting, the Beckwiths learned that the principal had told all five teachers to attend. It was a distasteful, public confrontation quite out of the ordinary for this small community. After the Beckwiths left, the teachers, principal, and school board concluded that the Beckwith girl was immature. The board failed to request the principal to present test data regarding the performance of the first graders, as the Beckwiths had hoped it would.

The Beckwiths experienced turmoil leading up to the school board meeting and afterward. Mrs. Beckwith said, "Our lives were hell for six months. It was terrible." Mr. Beckwith recognized a long-standing pattern of the principal: to control, not only his class, the teachers, and the school board, but also the parents in the community. Parents were afraid to complain to him. Said Mr. Beckwith: "If you question him, you're on the bad side already, and people don't want to be on his bad side." His wife added, "Of course, we've been on his bad side for four years now. We don't lose any sleep over it anymore."

The principal retired after 31 years with the school district and, at the end, Mr. Beckwith was still on his bad side because he had pursued his concern with the competence of the first-and-second grade teacher. But the relationship with the retiring principal wasn't the only one affected. After his retirement, the principal appeared to continue to influence the school. The principal who replaced him--principal two--was somewhat sympathetic to the Beckwiths after hearing of their concerns with the first-and-second

grade teacher who, at that time, was teaching the Beckwith's second child. Principal two instituted a few changes before he was released from his contract at the end of the first year. Then principal three was hired. Mrs. Beckwith said,

> See, we firmly believe that the last guy was coming around to our way of thinking and he's gone. So we're really hesitant to talk to this guy. This guy's a perfectly nice guy, a perfectly innocent guy, as was the former guy. You know?...So we kind of stay clear of him.

In short, conflict over the performance of the first-and second-grade teacher changed the Beckwith's long standing relationship with the first principal while the second principal, who was sympathetic to their views, was released; so the Beckwiths just stay away from the third principal to avoid forming a relationship with him.

Some Friendships Change.

Some parents sensed changes in friendships. Mrs. Johnson was the most specific about how standing up for her child at school influenced friendships. She said that as the community learned about the Johnson's conflict with the school they were treated like "lepers." Some of their friends just "melted away."

> That's when we really noticed that friends sort of chose up sides. They knew when we were really having trouble and things weren't going well. It's a small enough community that they probably had teachers over or whatever and they would hear the school's side, and then they would see us, and they would hear our side. And so they would sort of choose up sides or, if whoever was their school contact was really close and we were really close, it just became kind of an off-limits subject. It's a matter of, "If we're going to be friends we just can't discuss this. This is just not something that we can talk about." So they either became, it seemed like, our friends and supported us and felt like the school

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> wasn't doing correctly, or we're no longer their friends and they supported the school, and then the others--you just couldn't discuss it.

I ask, "Was that sort of a silent understanding?" and she continued:

> It wasn't just--yes. The ones that we didn't discuss it with. Because you would talk to them a time or two and they would just say, "uh huh," or were, you know, very reserved. And you knew you needed to change subjects. And it wasn't that they got up and left or that they argued with you. It's just that they very politely and quietly listened. And then, as soon as possible, changed the subject. And so you just--over time, you knew that wasn't going to be discussed and so you went on to other things.

So the Johnsons and certain friends drifted apart; with other friends they silently agreed not to discuss their conflict with the school. These behaviors seem like the tertiary effects of the child's dyslexia: (a) his dyslexia caused him to be a non-normative learner; (b) being a non-normative learner caused the parents and teachers and principal to be in conflict over how he should be taught; and (c) this conflict caused friends to choose sides.

The Beckwiths sensed both a cooling and a distancing from some of their friends and neighbors along with some admiration for standing up to the powerful principal. In addition, they felt betrayed and disappointed that some persons spoke privately to them about the problem with the first-and-second grade teacher but did not speak out publicly. Mr. Beckwith said,

> What bothers me, there are some people I thought would take some stands and try to help out...they know exactly what we're talking about, but they didn't take a stand.

The Beckwiths had formed an informal alliance with a couple of other families whose children seemed to have lost ground during first grade according to achievement tests.

When one of the board members wasn't forthcoming, Mrs. Beckwith wanted to look him in the eye and say, "Your wife told me otherwise." Mrs. Beckwith also had discussed the problem with a part-time teacher with whom she had developed a relationship. The teacher's daughter hadn't progressed well while she was in the first grade either. Mrs. Beckwith said,

> We kind of took her into our confidence, and kind of developed a rapport with her, and I thought a trust....When all this came up with our problem, and we were sitting there [in the board meeting] with documented evidence, she did not open her mouth to say one word that she'd ever had a problem.

The Beckwiths felt let down by a lack of support from others, but worse, they were disappointed in the characters of the people who would not say publicly what they had said privately.

It Can Make Professional Associations Tricky

Mr. Miller explained how his interaction with the principal was intertwined with his own professional role:

> Of course one of the things that probably enters into it [is] OK, he's the principal of a high school. I'm an associate dean of [the vocational school], and we're in the same town. There's got to be some interaction between these institutions. They certainly have official and unofficial relationships. And so I'm not going to do something that I think would damage the relationship between the school system and [the vocational school]. As a matter of fact, at the time I [contested my son being removed from the track team]... I was a little concerned about that, I told my immediate boss, the president....I said, "Well, I don't know whether I call this a problem or not." But I simply told him of the conversation. I told him of what I had done. And really what he felt, I don't know. He didn't really respond one way or the other, so I don't know.

In small communities, it is inevitable that some professional relationships will cross over the parent-principal relationship. Conflict over a child's situation at school can have a ripple effect on the organizations the parents work in. Mr. Miller not only had his son's well-being to consider but also his own standing within the vocational school and the relationship between the vocational school and the school district.

Others May View Us Differently Now

Some parents sensed that they were viewed differently by people in the community. For example, Mrs. Beckwith said, "You know, we walk in the door and some people give us the cold shoulder and others don't....I think some of them actually respect us for what we did."

I asked Mrs. Robinson how she thought others viewed her standing up for her son at school, and she said:

> They had admiration for me for...having guts. I guess that's the term I really need. For being a female and having guts. Because normally females in the South don't have guts. Females are supposed to be really just a submissive type person, and not do things like I would do: be outspoken, talk to principals, talk to superintendents about my problem, address the teacher, talk to other people and let them know what's going on.

But Mrs. Robinson also said that some members of the black community may have thought that she considered herself too good for the rest of them because she played an active, visible role in her children's school. Mrs. Beckwith, Mrs. Robinson, and other parents didn't seem to care much about what others in the community thought about them in a general way. They did what they thought had to be done because it was on behalf of their children.

However, being "framed" as a bad parent seemed to be more disturbing to parents. While urban and suburban parents and their children were labeled this or that kind of person, the parents in small communities were being framed by people

who knew them. The Johnsons, for example, were seen as model parents with their older children. They helped with projects at school, and Mrs. Johnson was a room mother every year. But when the youngest son began to show signs of not doing well in school and the Johnsons began to stand up for him,

> It was a shock (Mrs. Johnson said) to see how we were treated as opposed to being accepted scholastically at school and socially as we already had been, but even to be accepted as "successful" parents--as we have been with [the older sons] then to all of the sudden be, you know, not successful anymore and not acceptable. That was a shock!....Now we're not the intelligent, cooperative, nice parents that they want to be there all the time. We're the troublemakers. We're not successful parents.

During high school, Pat's grades were good, and he was active in many extra-curricular activities. By the time he graduated from high school, he had become a star. Mr. Johnson said, "The last week of school we got plaques and awards for this child. His picture was in the paper his whole last year of school. Everybody telling me how great he was, and it angered me." The grade-school principal with whom there had been protracted conflict, said to Mr. Johnson, "What a great job!" But Mr. Johnson said, "When I needed him, when I <u>needed</u> him, he wasn't there!" Mrs. Johnson said,

> Because all of the sudden, all of the sudden,...we have become good parents again. We have become the model again. We're the ones that they say, "Look what they did. And their kid had problems. But look what he accomplished." Now we're back to successful!

Some resentment lingered as the Johnsons reflected on having once been considered good parents, then become regarded as bad parents, losing friends and support, and then being rehabilitated at their son's graduation because he overcame not only the disability but also the school's labeling him a slow learner. These weren't strangers who

framed, reframed, and again reframed Mr. and Mrs. Johnson. These were people who knew them. They were people they knew.

When Mr. Beckwith first approached the principal regarding concerns about the first-and-second grade teacher, the conversation ended with the principal asking a couple of questions. Mrs. Beckwith said:

> That was the time that my husband's parenting skills were questioned. The question was, "Clearance, how much time do you spend with you daughter?" And this coming from a man who has known my husband since he was a small child! What kind of father he was! So I was very offended by that, but we kind of let that pass at the time....And then, "How often do you take the family to church?" which I think was none of his business.

Although it offended his wife, Mr. Beckwith was not surprised. He knew the principal and saw this as his subtle way of trying to intimidate him. According to Stern (1994), "The family, the church and the school have been at the heart of rural communities since this country was settled. These three institutions have provided the standards of behavior, circles of personal interaction, and a variety of social activities that collectively shape community ethos and identity" (p. 21). Given the powerful position of the school, a principal can sting a parent by framing his daughter's poor academic progress, not as a teacher problem, but as a parent's deficiency.

None of the parents expressed bitterness over the course of their relationships resulting from conflict with the school. Rather, they seemed resigned to them and to have accommodated the consequences. They seemed wise about negotiating life, learning some lessons, and doing their best when they felt caught between forces. That's not to say some hurt feelings and disappointments with others didn't linger, but there was a sense of moving on. To live in a rural community was to know people and associate with them, even when things did not go well.

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Reflections on Knowing and Being Known at School

One of the consequences of phenomenological research is to enhance our appreciation of people's experiences and to be more sensitive to them (Polkinghorne, 1989). A deeper understanding of others' experiences is especially significant for those in helping professions. What sense do we make of parents knowing others and being known in rural schools? What lessons should we take from these eight parents' experiences that might enable us to practice our respective professions in more sensitive, more productive ways?

For these few parents, being known and being in conflict with the school varied in significance. One couple experienced little conflict, so knowing and being known at school was both taken for granted and regarded as essentially positive. Another couple battled the school for twelve years, watched while others in the community framed their son as unable, and lost friends as people took sides in their conflict with the school. Their son's learning disability and his schooling was a formative, oppressive, persistent force in their lives; at the same time, knowing and being known by the players in their drama intensified the effects of the conflict with the school. The parents were relieved beyond words when their son graduated from high school.

Why is it that educators do not consider the effect of children's schooling on parents? Why is it that adult development theorists and parent educators do not attend to parents' experiences with schools?

When parents come to school asking after their children, how might rural teachers respond differently if they were more caring? What might they see differently, if they look at the situation from the parent's perspective? What might they understand newly if they considered parents' experiences with their children and with entering the classrooms to ask after the children? What are the signs that parents are struggling to guide their children and, at the same time,

struggling with how the community views them and the children? What is a teacher to do when he sees the signs of struggle? If personal knowledge about parents is a resource, how might the teacher use it to help parents?

How would a principal in a rural school listen to a parent, if she or he were intensely engaged and empathetic with the parent? What would a principal hear, if she were more attentive to the parent's concerns and fears for his son or daughter? What would a principal think if he were mindful that children's problems at school carry over into the community, and that conflict at school can alter a family's relationships in the community forever? What is a principal to do about knowing parents?

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Appendix

A description of the methodology for the study is included in this appendix in an effort to bridge the styles of positivistic and phenomenological writing. Inclusion of the research procedures here gives the reader information that may help in judging the credibility of the work, yet does not interfere with the flow of the narrative.

The purpose of phenomenological research is to produce clear and accurate descriptions of human experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989). Phenomenological research is the study of everyday, lived experiences and the meanings we construct from them (van Manen, 1990). Three important assumptions characterize phenomenological research: that humans seek meaning in their lives, there are multiple realities, and that realities are socially constructed. The researcher, therefore, attempts to understand a participant's experience from the participant's perspective.

Phenomenological studies start with a question about what an experience is like. The original research project I was doing addressed the question: "What is it like for parents to stand up for their children at school?" When the interviews with rural, middle-class parents clearly disclosed a theme of knowing others and being known by them, I created the study within the original study. The research question for this "study within" (the study reported in this paper) is: What does it mean for parents to know and be known by others in rural schools?

The particpants, five middle-class families in three midwestern and southern communities, were identified through the snowball method: friends, students, and acquaintances identified parents who, in turn, helped to identify other parents who were invited to participate. Each participant was interviewed in private, except when the spouse was also a participant. They were interviewed two or three times in their homes; the only missed personal interview was conducted later by phone. The interviews were lengthy and

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conversational in tone. As each conversation progressed, I summarized to the parent what I thought was being said and asked if that was what she or he meant. The conversations were also audio recorded and transcribed.

I used a holistic approach to uncover themes (van Manen, 1990) as I listened to the tapes and read the transcripts over and over. I talked by phone and corresponded with the participants occasionally while I was writing and rewriting drafts of the themes. After I thought I had captured the meaning of the themes, I sent a draft of the paper to the eight participants asking (a) if my draft accurately reflected his or her experiences and (b) if each felt sufficiently camouflaged to be anonymous.

Other phenomenologists also read and critiqued drafts of paper. Then using the feedback from parents and phenomenologists, the paper was redrafted, yet again.

Footnotes

[1]"Rural" is used in this paper to designate communities that are more than 100 miles from a city (Pladson & Lemon, 1982) and are agriculturally based; the residents express traditional values (Nachtigal, 1982b); and fewer than 1,000 children are in a school district.

[2]The participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.